1:Seligmann & Seligmann E-5 (1907-1908) 1911
AX5 Vedda AX5

CHAPTER IV

FAMILY LIFE

THE family life of the wilder Veddas centres round the rock-shelters which are truly their homes, and even among those Veddas who practise chena cultivation, but have not formed permanent settlements, these rock-shelters play an important part, the movements of the community or family group from shelter to shelter being regulated according to season and available food supply. Our experience leads us to believe that the wilder Veddas so greatly prefer rock-shelters to huts that they seldom build the latter, preferring rather to face the inconvenience of travelling some distance daily in search of food, and even to camp for the night under some temporary shelter. Except in this particular Nevill's description of the movements of a Vedda family still holds good if it be remembered that he applies the term "Village Vaedda" to any Vedda who makes even the roughest chena. "The Forest Vaedda forms a home two or three times a year, as the season demands. Thus in the dry hot months when brooks and ponds dry up, the game collects in the low forests around the half dried river beds. (He then takes his wife and children, aged parents or crippled relatives, and settles them in a hut close to a place where water can be got.)From this he makes his hunting forays, and returns to it with his game.) The rain sets in however, and the iguanas, deer, pigs, etc. are scattered over the country; the elk then seek rocky hills, and are followed by the Vaedda. The little household goods, the children, and family party, again are moved up to the high ground, avoiding the malaria that now hangs as a shroud over the forest-clad lowlands. Here, if possible, a cave is chosen for the home, and improved by a slight roof in front, if

342
221
[592]

1;Seligmann & Seligmann E-5 (1907-1908) 1911
AX5 Vedda AX5

Things new to them which we showed

them often provoked peals of laughter; to see the eldest and most venerable man solemnly have his thumb nail pressed by a brass machine (algometer) was particularly amusing to the rest of the community, one man actually rolling on the ground with laughter. The old man took it all in excellent part and smiled indulgently. Doubtless Veddas vary much in character, but all except the "show" Veddas are genial and courteous, and have always been rightly considered truthful. At Sitala Wanniya Handuna was the most intelligent man, keenly interested in all the new things we showed him; he obviously ruled the community by force of character, coupled with the fact that he was a shaman. Nila, however, was also a shaman, but he was obviously not so strong a man as Handuna, to whose opinion he deferred, and naturally took second place. Vela, half-brother of Handuna, was extremely shy but by no means stupid, he generally tried to get out of doing things, professing inability, but when urged by Handuna did everything as well as the other men. Kaira, *baena* (son-in-law) to Handuna, was intelligent and talkative and inclined to be boastful. Pema, *baena* to Nila, did not speak much, chiefly we thought because he was a young man and had not much to tell, for although he did not chatter like Kaira he smiled and did not hang his head when addressed, as Vela did.

Whether staying in a "private" or "communal" cave the family life continues in much the same manner. If in a communal cave, each family keeps strictly within its own limits, the women may always be seen at exactly the same spot, and when the men come in they sit or lie beside their wives, keeping to that part of the cave floor that belongs to them as carefully as though there was a partition dividing it from that of their neighbours. Figure 2 is a plan of Pihilegodagalge showing the actual division of floor space. Food is frequently cooked by one woman and shared by all the members of the community, in fact, although it might be cooked separately, it did not seem that any food was private property. One other fact was very noticeable in communal caves, namely, that men never kept their bows and arrows in their own division, but always put them all together in a particular

1:Seligmann & Seligmann E-5 (1907-1908) 1911
AX5 Vedda AX5

place.) The "arsenal" at Bendiyagalge is well seen in Plate XIX, figures 1 and 2, while at Pihilegodagalge all the bows and arrows were rested on an old ant heap in the centre of the cave.

Though men do sometimes dig for yams, hunting is essentially their work, and yams were usually dug by the women who also do the cooking. This is of the simplest kind; yams are roasted in ashes, in which way meat may also be cooked, while practically everything else is boiled in a pot over three stones. Many Veddas also know how to cook curry, and deer's flesh is dried on a rack and smoked. A rack is built usually in a sunny place, the meat is put on this and a smoky fire kept burning beneath it, the flesh is thus dried in the sun and smoked simultaneously. This process is usually superintended by men.

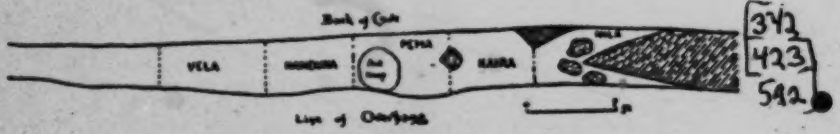

Fig. 2. Plan of Pihilegodagalge.

Plate XVII, figure 1, shows a rack built to smoke meat on the top of the Bendiyagalge rock-mass.

A Vedda will never sleep on the ground if there is any rock upon which he can lie. If he has a deerskin or a piece of cloth he will lie on it, if not he does not seem to object to the cold rock, and so avoids contact with the ground damp from the heavy dews. He always keeps a small fire burning beside him; this was noticed by Nevill, who says: "A Vaedda never sleeps without a smouldering fire by his side. I am assured, should accident oblige them to do so, they have usually died from a fever caught by the omission[1]."

The Veddas are strictly monogamous, and we were able to confirm Bailey's observations as regards their marital fidelity. "Their constancy to their wives is a very remarkable trait in their character in a country where conjugal fidelity is certainly not classed as the highest of domestic virtues. Infidelity,

[1] *Taprobanian*, Vol. 1, Aug. 1886, p. 187.

2: Bailey G-5 (ca. 1854) 1863
AX5 Vedda AX5
Sinhalese AX4

very careful in my inquiries on the subject. Had it existed, the neighbouring Singhalese would have had no hesitation in accusing them of it, but I could not obtain a trace of it. Tennent's remarks on this subject are wholly inapplicable to the wild Veddahs of Bintenne or Nilgala, though they may apply to those Veddahs of whom he writes.*

They never marry out of their race, and, with the very smallest cause, the men are exceedingly jealous of their most unattractive wives. They are very careful to keep them apart from their companions. Their huts contain but one family each, and when they live in caves, each dwelling-place is carefully screened off. There are as many as seventeen separate huts and caves among the seventy-two Veddahs of Nilgala; hardly more than four individuals to each habitation.

Polyandry is unknown among them. The practice is alluded to with genuine disgust. I asked a Veddah once, what the consequence would be if one of their women were to live with two husbands, and the unaffected vehemence with which he raised his axe, and said, "a blow would settle it," shewed conclusively to my mind, the natural repugnance with which they regard this national custom of their Kandyan neighbours. Their abstinence from a practice, which, till 1859, was recognized by the laws of the land, is remarkable. So sensitive are they on these subjects, that I know an instance of a Veddah—and he was by no means one of the wildest—drawing his knife, and being with difficulty restrained from using it, at a remark made in jest which he considered a reflection on the honour of their women.†

It is notorious that the Kandyans have no scruples with regard to divorce. Among them, husbands desert their wives, and wives their husbands, for any or no reason. Sickness is perhaps the most common cause. The heartless desertion of a sick wife is, I think, the worst trait in the Kandyan character, and the cool and unconcerned manner in which they themselves allude to it, shows that it is as common as it is cruel.‡

---

* Tennent, vol. ii, part ix, chap. iii, p. 444, 2nd edit.

† Tennent says, "The community is too poor to afford polygamy," but I am convinced that is not the cause of its non-existence. We find it in smaller communities than these.

‡ In a civil suit in the District Court some years ago, a witness said in reply to a question from me—"How can I tell how many wives he had? A woman is married to-day, and leaves her husband to-morrow. If the wife gets sick, the husband deserts her; if the husband, the wife deserts him." A young girl of sixteen or so once coolly confessed before me to having had five husbands, three of whom were living, and two present in court, of whom one had just attempted suicide for her sake! I met with an instance of a man who had been married fifteen times; and I have heard of a woman who had had thirteen husbands.